

Museum Careers in Textile Conservation
Jessica Urick and Anna Rose Keefe
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Summary by Emma Silverton

Museums around the world are able to display and preserve garments that are thousands of years old. They often have a series of special exhibitions that feature garments new and old, that all have to be protected and displayed in a safe manner. This is done by textile conservators like Jessica Urick and Anna Rose Keefe. Jessica and Anna Rose are both textile conservators at the RISD museum in Providence, Rhode Island. As conservators, their job is to store, preserve, maintain, and keep documentation on various garments to prolong their lives for future use and observation.

Work as a textile conservator is at a slower pace and is more tedious than some other professions related to fashion, partially due to the age of the textiles and the care levels needed, and partially due to working in conjunction with a museum. Part of their work as conservators includes preserving garments while respecting their histories, cultural meaning, and fragility. Each move made to repair a garment needs to be documented thoroughly for future conservators to be able to get a complete history of the item and what has been done to it. Also, nothing permanent can be done to alter the garment, even in repairs, so anything done to the garment must be able to be undone. History and cultural context need to be taken into consideration, as a tear in the garment might have had a purpose, and shouldn't be repaired in case it alters the garment's meaning or history. Textiles must be stored with extreme care and caution, and each alteration must be considered in the context of what it may do to the textile in the future, and how it could alter any meaning from the past. Textile conservation work with museums is also pre-planned years in advance. Planning for upcoming exhibitions begins years in advance, and each step is meticulously planned out. Textile conservators like Anna Rose and Jessica need to be knowledgeable and fastidious to keep track of textiles and timelines.

Jessica and Anna Rose work at the RISD museum with a small staff of two curators and two conservators; they are responsible for a wide range of textiles. RISD's textile collection has artifacts from as early as 1500 BCE to current pieces. Along with being cared for and stored at RISD, these textiles are sometimes used in exhibitions, or loaned to other museums for their own exhibitions. There are usually multiple exhibits being planned at the same time with different timelines, starting from three years in advance to the opening of the exhibition. Once the themes are set and the pieces are chosen, there's still the matter of designing the space, deciding how the pieces are will be displayed and mounted, and insuring the objects. Organization and collaboration with others in their department and other museums are key skills needed.

To show how an aspiring textile conservator might get where they are now, Jessica and Anna Rose had their own personal career paths and suggestions for beginning a career in textile conservation. To pursue a career as a textile conservator, they stressed first doing an internship or apprenticeship to be sure, before getting too far in grad school to change. After completing one or a few of the multitude of programs available to conservators, there are professional groups that can be joined to make contacts and look for job opportunities, such as the Costume Society of America, or the American Institute for Conservation. Jessica and Anna Rose helped lay out a starting path for anyone interested, and showed a career in textile conservation as a rewarding endeavor.